

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L CALCUTTA 1537

FI CHANNEL

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: ASIG
SUBJECT: CALCUTTA POST MEMORANDUM

1. CALCUTTA'S CONSULAR DISTRICT IS THE LARGEST OF INDIA'S THREE IN POPULATION, WITH MORE THAN 200 MILLION PEOPLE, AND IS BY FAR THE MOST DIFFICULT IN WHICH TO TRAVEL. FOR HISTORICAL REASONS, AND PROBABLY OUT OF ITS CURIOUS PERCEPTION OF ITS INTERNAL SECURITY SITUATION, THE GOI HAS REFUSED TO RECOGNIZE THAT SIX STATES AND TWO UNION TERRITORIES LIE OFFICIALLY WITHIN THE CONSULAR JURISDICTION OF ANY FOREIGN CONSULATE IN CALCUTTA. TRAVEL BY DIPLOMATS TO THESE AREAS, AND EVEN TO THE NORTHERN FIVE DISTRICTS OF THE STATE OF WEST BENGAL, REQUIRES SPECIAL PERMISSION OF THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS IN DELHI, WITH ADVANCE NOTICE OF TWO OR MORE MONTHS; THE PERMISSION CAN BE GRANTED OR REFUSED AT THE LAST MOMENT WITHOUT EXPLANATION. WE DO NOT KNOW THE ISOLATED AND GENERALLY NEGLECTED NORTHEASTERN REGION AS WE WOULD LIKE.

2. ALTHOUGH PERPETUALLY TROUBLED BIHAR IS THE LARGEST OF OUR STATES (POPULATION 60 MILLION) , WEST BENGAL IS THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC HUB OF THE AREA THAT COMPRISES THE HEAVY INDUSTRY AND MINING HEARTLAND
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OF INDIA. SUFFERING FROM DECAYING INDUSTRY, HEAVY UNEMPLOYMENT, AND A PARTICULARIST OUTLOOK AND RIVALRY TOWARDS THE HINDI BELT OF INDIA AND THE CENTER GOVERNMENT, WEST BENGAL HAS BEEN FIRMLY UNDER THE CONTROL OF A COMMUNIST STATE GOVERNMENT SINCE MID-1977 AND IS LIKELY TO REMAIN SO FOR THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE. WHILE THE CPM GOVERNMENT IS IN MANY RESPECTS PRAGMATIC, AND CONSCIOUS

OF THE NEED TO ADMINISTER THE STATE AS EFFECIENTLY AS POSSIBLE AND WITH A MINIMUM OF PLEMICS, LIKE ANY COMMUNIST MOVEMENT IT CONTAINS ITS SHARE OF IDEOLOGUES, WHO HAVE NO USE FOR THE WEST IN GENERAL AND THE US IN PARTICULAR. THUS, WE CAN WORK WITH SOME MINISTERS AND CANNOT WITH OTHERS (INFORMATION, FOR EXAMPLE).

3. ALTHOUGH IN MOST RESPECTS THE SECURITY SITUATION IN CALCUTTA IS MUCH IMPROVED OVER WHAT IT WAS FIVE OR TEN YEARS AGO, THERE SEEMS TO BE RISING LEVEL OF NONPOLITICAL VIOLENCE, AND A CERTAIN BREAKDOWN IN LAW AND ORDER IN THE CITY SURROUNDING AREAS. SO FAR THIS HAS IN NO WAY BEEN DIRECTED AT FOREIGNERS PER SE. YET GIVEN ITS HISTORY ONE CAN ONLY REMEMBER THAT THE POTENTIAL FOR VIOLENCE IS NEVER FAR BELOW THE SURFACE IN WEST BENGAL.

4. IN ADDITION TO THE ROLE OF THE POST IN SUPPLYING CERTAIN AMOUNTS OF ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT TO OUR EMBASSIES IN KATHMANDU AND DACCA, THE PROXIMITY OF BANGLADESH, WHICH IS SURROUNDED BY THIS CONSULAR DISTRICT, HAS TRADITIONALLY GIVEN RISE TO PROBELMS OF REFUGEES BACK AND FORTH ACROSS THE RATHER POROUS FRONTIER. AT THE MOMENT THE REFUGEE SITUATION IS CALM, BUT THE POST RETAINSSA WATCHING BRIEF ON THE SUBJECT.

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5. WHILE THE AMERICAN PRESENCE, OFFICIAL AND UNOFFICIAL, IN THIS CONSULAR DISTRICT IS MODEST, THE POST HAS RECENTLY EXPERIENCED SOME CONSULAR PROBLEMS WITH AMERICAN MEMBERS OF TWO INCIDENT-PRONE RELIGIOUS SECTS: THE ANANDA MARG AND THE ISKCON (THE HARE KRISHNA GROUP). IN GENERAL CONSULAR WORK RUNS SMOOTHLY IN THIS CONSULAR DISTRICT. HOWEVER, THE POOR STATE OF COMMUNICATIONS AND TRANSPORTATION, ESPECIALLY IN THE NORTHEAST WITH OUR ACCESS PROBLEM, CAN IMPEDE EFFORTS TO SUPPLY ADEQUATE CONSULAR SERVICES OUTSIDE OF THE CALCUTTA AREA.

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